

Frequently Asked Questions about Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an inflammation of the liver caused by the Hepatitis A virus.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

The virus is spread person-to-person by hands that have not been washed after going to the bathroom or touching other contaminated items such as diapers, linens, uncooked foods and then inadvertently touching your mouth. This is called the fecal oral route of infection. It can also be contracted by drinking/eating contaminated water/ice or uncooked foods.

How long are people contagious?

Someone infected with the Hepatitis A virus can spread the disease from one week before they have symptoms until two weeks after symptoms begin.

If I have had Hepatitis A before, can I get it again?

No. Once you have had Hepatitis A, you cannot get it again.

Will I die if I get Hepatitis A?

It is very unlikely that someone with Hepatitis A will suffer long-term liver damage or death from the infection.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis A?

People who are infected with Hepatitis A may or may not have symptoms. Symptoms are more likely to occur in older adults versus children. Symptoms usually last less than two months. Symptoms include:

- ◆ Fever
- ◆ Fatigue
- ◆ Stomach pain
- ◆ Loss of appetite
- ◆ Nausea
- ◆ Yellow skin and whites of the eyes (jaundice) and dark, Coca-Cola colored urine

When do symptoms usually start?

Most people will begin to have symptoms almost a month after they were exposed to the virus, although symptoms can occur as soon as two weeks after exposure up to 50 days after the initial exposure.

How will the doctor know if I have Hepatitis A?

Your doctor will first take a complete history and perform a physical exam. To make a definitive diagnosis of Hepatitis A, your doctor will order a blood test to determine if you have antibodies to the virus that indicate you have been *recently* exposed to the Hepatitis A virus.

Is there a treatment?

While there is no medicine to treat Hepatitis A after you have developed symptoms, immune globulin can be given to people who have had contact with someone infected with the virus. If taken within two weeks of the exposure, symptoms can be minimized or prevented.

What is immune globulin?

Immune globulin is a preparation of antibodies that is obtained from people who have already fought off the virus and formed protective antibodies. The immune globulin is injected into the contact and will provide short-term protection (passive immunity) to those persons already exposed.

Isn't there a vaccine against Hepatitis A?

Yes. However it takes four weeks to develop protective antibodies against the virus after you are vaccinated (active immunity). Therefore, it is not beneficial for persons already exposed to the virus. It is however recommended for certain high-risk people, including travelers to countries that have intermediate to high rates of Hepatitis A. Please check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a full list of persons who should be electively vaccinated against Hepatitis A. (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/a/index.htm#vaccine>)

Can Hepatitis A be prevented?

Yes. Good hand hygiene is critical to reduce the risk of Hepatitis A. To further minimize the risk of Hepatitis A we recommend the following:

- ◆ Always wash hands after using the bathroom or cleaning the toilet
- ◆ Always wash hands after changing a diaper
- ◆ Always wash hands after handling soiled towels or linens
- ◆ Always wash hands before fixing food or eating food
- ◆ If you have been exposed to the Hepatitis A virus, contact your doctor about immune globulin
- ◆ If traveling to intermediate or high risk areas for Hepatitis A:
 - Get immune globulin or the vaccine before travel; it is best to get the vaccine at least four weeks before you travel
 - Drink bottled water or other beverages
 - Do not eat uncooked fruits or vegetables, unless you peel them yourself

For more information about Hepatitis A, visit the CDC website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/a/index.htm>